

## The correct scientific name of the White-bellied Heron

by Michael Walters

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This species has been variously called *Ardea insignis* Hume (1878, based on a *nomen nudum* by Hodgson) or *imperialis* Baker (1928) and, in the light of the biography of Hodgson by Cocker & Inskipp (1988), in which no mention of the problem was made, it seems desirable to present facts that give Hodgson his full credit. Furthermore, the "evidence" on which the name *insignis* is currently accepted is confused and tenuous, and requires clarification. Biswas (1960) stated: "The name should be *Ardea insignis* Hume. Hume's name is available, since its citation as a synonym of *Ardea nobilis* Blyth and *Ardea sumatrana* Raffles are [sic] based on misidentification". Ripley (1982, p. 12) accepted the name *insignis* for the bird he had previously called *imperialis*, citing Biswas as his sole authority. Sibley & Monroe (1990, p. 304) also adopted *insignis* but without mentioning Biswas, remarking that Ripley had correctly resolved the issue. Inskipp *et al.* (1996, p. 103) adopted *insignis*, citing Sibley & Monroe as their authority and without mentioning either Biswas or Ripley. Thus the question as to which name is correct appears to rest solely on the terse statement of Biswas. Was he correct?

The traditional scenario of the nomenclatural history of this bird is given by Hancock & Elliot (1978) as follows. In 1844 Hodgson used the name *insignis* for a heron "of which insufficient clues as to the identity were given". The *nomen nudum* could have been used again by Hume when validating Hodgson's name, but for the fact that Gray (1844 & 1871) had placed it in the synonymy of two other species, *nobilis* and *sumatrana*. Baker (1928) allegedly proposed that this invalidated Hume's (1878) resuscitation of the name and proposed the substitute name *imperialis*. This assertion was denied by Biswas (1960). In fact, Baker's account states that he was proposing the new name because Hume's name was *preoccupied* by Hodgson's, i.e. that the earlier name referred to a different taxon from that of Hume. However, Hancock & Elliot considered that "no more than circumstantial evidence of errors on Gray's part" was sufficient to "tip the balance" in favour of *imperialis*. Unfortunately, most of the arguments used here are wrong, for there is no question as to the correct identity of Hodgson's bird.

Hodgson did not first use the name in 1844. It previously appeared in his unpublished paintings, of which Hodgson (1844) is a catalogue. This painting was plate 61, fig. 2, based on specimen no. 645 in Hodgson's collection. In 1844, Hodgson listed a specimen of *A. insignis* collected by himself, no. 645. This specimen, and another, are still in the Natural History Museum, Tring, collection, reg. nos. 1843.1.13.1236 and 1237. Their original Hodgson labels have been removed, but the register quite clearly gives the number of both specimens alongside the registration

numbers as 645. There can be no doubt, therefore, that these two birds are Hodgson's "types", and are also the adult and juvenile skins listed by Sharpe (1898) as from the Hodgson collection.

The supposed relegation of *insignis* to the synonymy of *nobilis* by G.R. Gray (1844) is also based on a misconception. In this, Gray listed Hodgson's two specimens of *insignis*, which he called the Great Indian Heron, and prefixed the name *insignis* with *nobilis* Blyth, giving the reference "Ann. of Nat. Hist, 1844, p. " (i.e. with a space where the page number should be). In other words, the name *nobilis* had not been published at the time Gray went to press, thus *nobilis* was a *nomen nudum* at this point! Gray evidently thought that Blyth's name would prove to be the same as Hodgson's, and merely placed it first because Hodgson's was a manuscript name. There was, however, no question as to the identity of Hodgson's name. The same error occurred in Gray (1846). Here again, the page number of Blyth's reference has been omitted, but in his own personal copy of this catalogue (now held in the Zoology Library, The Natural History Museum) Hodgson had written in "p. 500". G.R. Gray (1871), having realised that Blyth's *nobilis* was not the same as *insignis*, but was actually a synonym of *Ardea goliath* Cretzschmar, a bird hitherto known only from Africa, made the further error of placing *insignis* in the synonymy of *A. sumatrana* Raffles (1822).

Much of this is, in fact, academic. Under the terms of ICZN (1999), a *nomen nudum* is not an available name, and therefore may be reused for the same or another taxon. There is no suggestion that the subsequent placing of the name in synonymy prevents its reuse. Biswas was therefore right in claiming that Hodgson's (1844) name was available to Hume. Unfortunately, the publication of Hodgson's name does not satisfy the provisions of Article 12.2 of the Code, since this specifically excludes a specimen as constituting an "indication" for a new species. This prevents the name *insignis* being credited to Hodgson. Notwithstanding the existence of the specimens and the plate, both of which are quite identifiable, the name remained a *nomen nudum* until resuscitated by Hume. The correct name is therefore *Ardea insignis* Hume.

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*Address:* Michael Walters, Bird Group, The Natural History Museum, Tring, Herts HP23 6AP.

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## **Monitoring populations of Red-footed Boobies *Sula sula* and frigatebirds *Fregata* spp. breeding on Aldabra Atoll, Indian Ocean**

*by Alan E. Burger & Michael Betts*

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Frigatebirds and boobies have experienced considerable persecution and disturbance in the western Indian Ocean over the past century, and during this time populations of both groups declined or disappeared on many islands (Feare 1978, Carboneras 1992, Orta 1992, Cheke 2001). Some colonies are now protected but the size and population trends are poorly known for most Indian Ocean colonies. We report counts of frigatebirds and boobies made on Aldabra Atoll in March-May 2000, and compare them with previous counts to assess population trends. We also make recommendations for future monitoring, and comment on the use of small boats as a censusing platform for seabirds nesting in mangroves.

Aldabra Atoll supports the largest breeding population of frigatebirds in the Indian Ocean, and the second largest in the world, with c. 6,000 pairs of Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel* and 4,000 pairs of Great Frigatebird *F. minor* (Reville 1983). The only other breeding site in Seychelles is nearby Cosmoledo Atoll which supports 200–400 pairs of each species (Rocamora & Skerrett 2001). Despite their global